

THE THREAD

DISCOVERING THE THREAD OF THE GOSPEL THROUGH THE BIG-PICTURE STORY OF THE BIBLE

PART 4: THE GOSPEL AT WORK

LESSON 4 || THE MURDER OF STEPHEN AND PERSECUTION

SESSION SNAPSHOT

NARRATIVE PASSAGE: Acts 6:8-8:3

GOSPEL FOCUS: John 15:18-21; 16:33

STUDENT TAKEAWAYS:

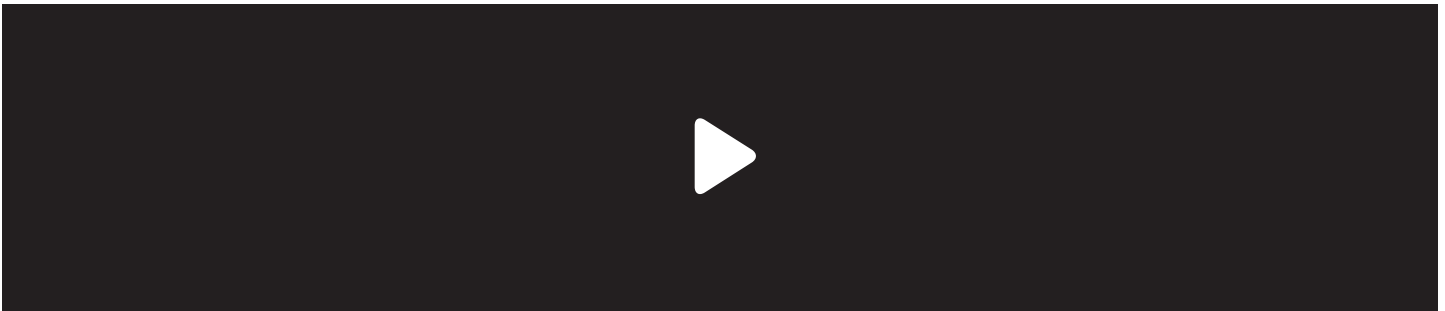
- Understand that Stephen's murder sparked large-scale persecution against the Jerusalem church.
- Understand that Jesus predicted that His followers would be mistreated because of their identity with Him.
- Define how Jesus' statement that He has "overcome the world" changes how they live out their faith.

OVERVIEW:

As the early church began to grow, the apostles appointed some men as deacons to help with the people's daily needs. One of the men chosen was Stephen, who went on to perform many miracles in the name of Jesus Christ. He was falsely accused of blaspheming God and brought before the high Jewish council. His speech is a beautiful recap of the history of God's work among His people. But when Stephen closed with a ringing indictment of the council's total disobedience to God, they had him stoned to death. Jesus said that when we follow Him, we will experience trials and sorrows in this world. But the good news is that the end of the story has already been written, and Jesus wins. Your students will focus on this fact in this lesson.

TEACHER PREP VIDEO:

Each *Thread* lesson comes with a Teacher Prep Video. These short videos are designed to help you grasp the lesson's main point as you prepare to teach.



BIBLE BACKGROUND

The Bible Background is designed to help you provide the basic context for the passages you'll be studying.

- **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "CONTEXT"?** In every YM360 Bible study lesson, we encourage teachers to help students know *who* wrote a particular book, *when* it was written, and *why* it was written.
- **WHY TEACH CONTEXT?** Grasping the big-picture view of God's story of redemption is difficult for teenagers without understanding the context of the books and passages they're studying.

ACTS

- *Author:* Acts has long been held to be a letter from Luke, a Gentile physician, to a man named Theophilus, possibly a

benefactor of some sort.

- *Time frame:* There is some debate over when Acts was written. The suggested dates are between 70 AD and 80 AD.
- *Purpose:* The book of Acts is a second letter to Theophilus that tells the story of the early Church following Jesus' resurrection. The book begins with Jesus' ascension and His command to His followers to proclaim the Gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The rest of the book traces this journey as the early Church leaders proclaim the Gospel and plant churches.

JOHN

- *Author:* The Gospel of John was written by John the Apostle, son of Zebedee. A fisherman who left his trade to follow Jesus, John also penned the Book of Revelation and the three New Testament letters that bear his name.
- *Time frame:* The Gospel of John was probably written between 85 and 95 AD. John most likely wrote his gospel in Ephesus before he was exiled to Patmos.
- *Purpose:* John's stated purpose for writing this book can be found in John 20:30-31, the last two verses in his gospel: "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" John's goal seems to have been to clearly communicate a full theology of Jesus as the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

LESSON PLAN

The Lesson Plan contains four elements:

- **GETTING STARTED**– An introductory activity designed to prepare teenagers to engage with God and the truth of His Word.
- **THE STORY**– A section featuring a narrative from Scripture that helps teenagers know God better through learning the story of the Bible.
- **THE THREAD**– A special emphasis where teenagers discover the Gospel thread coursing throughout the story of the Bible.
- **WRAPPING UP**– An application-focused segment helping teenagers ask the question, “How am I impacted by what I learned today”?

GETTING STARTED

- *Goal:* To help students understand the scope and types of persecution Christians face in the world today.
- *Set-Up:* None needed

FIRST, begin the discussion by asking:

- **How would you define the word persecution?**
 - *Answer:* After allowing a few minutes for answers, tell them the dictionary definition is hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs.
- **Do you think that persecution is a problem around the world? Specifically, do you think it’s a problem that Christians face?**
 - *Answers will vary.*

NEXT, explain to them that you’re going to ask them a few questions about the persecution of Christians around the world. The answers come from opendoorsusa.org. **Ask the following questions:**

- **How many Christians do you think are killed in the world for their Christian faith each week?**
 - *Answer:* 108
- **How many Christian churches do you think are attacked, looted, or forcibly closed because of persecution in the world each week?**
 - *Answer:* 41
- **How many Christians across the world do you think are displaced from their home or country because of their faith each week?**
 - *Answer:* 2692
- **Are you surprised by the numbers? Are they higher or lower than you expected? Explain.**
 - *Answers will vary.*

THEN, transition to The Story by saying something like:

- Today’s lesson is about the persecution of a young believer in the New Testament named Stephen. We’re going to look at why Stephen was killed and how God used his death for His glory. Then we’re going to think about the trials we might face because of our faith and how Jesus’ promises impact how we respond to them.

IF THERE ARE NO FURTHER QUESTIONS, TRANSITION TO THE STORY.

THE STORY

- *Goal:* For students to understand that Stephen's murder sparked large-scale persecution against the Jerusalem church.
- *Set-Up:* Students will need a Bible or a Bible app.

FIRST, tell your students that they have been studying what happened when the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost and how that event shaped the beliefs and actions of the early Church. Tell them that persecution from Jewish leaders started to increase as the Church began to grow and became bolder in its proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God. Take a few minutes to get the students up to date on some of the marvelous things that were happening in the beginning days of the Christian Church. Use the Connecting the Dots material to cover some of the things that happened in the Church between last week's lesson and today's study.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

As you teach *The Thread*, there will naturally be some gaps in the story. This is an optional way for you to fill in some of the gaps between the last lesson you taught and this one. Use it to review or connect the dots to the events surrounding the passage.

- People from all across the country brought the sick and the demon-possessed to the disciples, and all were healed.
- The disciples were imprisoned for what they were doing, but at night, an angel of the Lord freed them and told them to continue preaching in the temple.
- The apostles wanted to concentrate on preaching and teaching and asked the believers to choose seven men to assist with the food distribution program. One of the men chosen was Stephen.

THEN, ask the students to find Acts 6 in their Bibles or on their devices. While they're finding it, you can use the information found in the section of the lesson entitled Bible Background to give your students a better understanding of who wrote the book and why it was written.

NEXT, read or have a student read Acts 6:8-15 and **ask something like:**

- **Where did Stephen's wisdom come from?**
 - *Answer:* From the Holy Spirit.
- **Why did some people get upset with Stephen?**
 - *Answer:* They charged him with being blasphemous. This is the same thing many religious leaders said about Jesus. Since Stephen was a follower of Jesus and was doing amazing things, they were likely worried that he would disrupt their way of doing things.

THEN, explain to the students that the high priest asked Stephen if these charges were accurate. Stephen's response focused on a paraphrased version of Israel's history and is recorded in Acts 7:2-53. It focuses on Israel's rejection of what God had done for them over the years. Tell your students that you're going to read one specific section about Moses that gets at the heart of the entire speech.

NEXT, read or have a student read Acts 7:35-41 and **ask something like:**

- **Why does it seem so crazy that the Israelites wouldn't listen to Moses?**
 - *Answer:* Because of all the great things God had done for them through Moses. After all of that, it makes no sense for them not to follow what he told them.
- **Why did they turn to idols even though they had seen the Lord at work?**
 - *Answer:* Throughout Israel's history, for the most part, whenever they got frustrated or didn't feel like things were going their way, they would turn away from the Lord.

- Does all of this sound familiar to how we respond to seeing God at work? Explain.

- o *Answers will vary.*

THEN, explain to the students that in the verses you're about to read, Stephen turned the focus of his speech to his accusers. Read or have a student read Acts 7:51-53 and ask something like:

- How did Stephen describe his accusers? Let's list everything on the board.
 - o *Answer:* Stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart, Holy Spirit resisters, prophet persecutors, and disobeyers of the law.
- How do you feel when you get called out about something and you know the accusation is true?
 - o *Answers will vary.*

NEXT, read or have a student read Acts 7:54-60 and ask something like:

- Why do you think they were so angry?
 - o *Answer:* Because Stephen called them out and exposed their sin and rebellion against God. They didn't want to hear it.
- What was Stephen doing when he died? How is that even possible?
 - o *Answer:* He died praying for the Lord to receive his spirit and praying for those who were about to kill him. This type of peace and calm can only come from trust in the Lord's promises.

THEN, read or have a student read Acts 8:1-3 and ask something like:

- What did the stoning of Stephen spark?
 - o *Answer:* It sparked widespread persecution of Christians.
- Does this seem like a good or bad thing? Explain.
 - o *Answer:* On the surface, it seems bad.
- What good do you think could come from it? Does hearing that they were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria make you think of anything?
 - o *Answers:* Christians being spread to other regions could be a good thing because they could take the message of the Gospel into other areas. Jesus told the apostles in Acts 1:8 that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Close The Story by saying something like this:

- Throughout the gospels, Jesus talked about the reality that His followers would be mistreated for following Him. However, as we've just seen, He can use that mistreatment for His ultimate glory. Let's look a little bit deeper at what Jesus said about what would happen to those who identify with Him.

IF STUDENTS DON'T HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, TRANSITION INTO THE THREAD AND SEE HOW YOU CAN TRACE THE CONNECTION OF THE GOSPEL TO THE BIG-PICTURE NARRATIVE OF SCRIPTURE.

THE THREAD

FIRST, have your group turn to John 15. While they find it, briefly use the Bible Background material to give your group some context of what they're about to read.

THEN, read or have a student read John 15:18-21. Ask something like:

- **Why did/does the world hate Jesus?**
 - *Answer:* Because He challenges everything people hold dear. Following Jesus forces people to give up their own way of seeing the world. Following Him means giving up oneself, and people hate to hear that's the only way to live.
- **Why should Jesus' followers expect the same treatment?**
 - *Answers:* Because following Jesus means living a life like He lived and proclaiming the same message He proclaimed. Some people in the world will never appreciate or like that message.

NEXT, read or have a student read John 16:33. **Ask something like:**

- **What do you think it means that Jesus has overcome the world?**
 - *Answers will vary.*
- **Does that verse give you the confidence to face the realities of John 15:18-21? Explain.**
 - *Answers will vary.*

FINALLY, IF YOUR STUDENTS DON'T HAVE ANY MORE QUESTIONS, TRANSITION INTO THE WRAPPING UP SECTION.

WRAPPING UP

- *Goal:* For students to define how Jesus' statement that He has "overcome the world" changes how they live out their faith.
- *Set-Up:* A dry-erase board to jot down some answers if you have one available.

FIRST, begin by asking something like:

- **Are you hesitant or nervous about living out your faith in front of the people you are around on a daily basis? What is it that you're worried about?**
 - *Answers will vary.* Be sure to jot down some of their answers.
- **Let's think about Jesus' promise that He has overcome the world. How has He overcome these specific issues?**
 - *Answers will vary.* Try and address some of the most common answers the students gave. For example, if they're afraid of people accepting them, talk about how Jesus has perfectly accepted them. If they're afraid of being mistreated, talk to them about how Jesus has treated them. For any of their answers that involve worry, talk about the security we have in Jesus.
- **So, how should that change the way we think about these things?**
 - *Answers will vary.* It should squash our worries, fears, and insecurities.

THEN, tell the students that to wrap things up, you're all going to work together to define how Jesus overcoming the world impacts how you live out your faith. Write the following partial sentence on the board: "Jesus overcoming the world means that I _____." Lead the students through discussing how Jesus overcoming the world impacts how they live out their faith on a daily basis.

FINALLY, if there are no further questions, close your Bible study in prayer.

- If you've purchased the corresponding devotional journal, remind students they'll be working through Week 43 this week. Encourage them to keep up with the daily devotions and to give memorizing this week's verse their best shot.
- If you're utilizing the digital devotions included in the Thread curriculum, remind students how you'll be making them available, i.e., Instagram, Facebook, etc.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU . . .

- Do you have questions about a lesson?
- Something that worked particularly well that you want to share?
- Something that didn't work that you want to bring up?

We value your feedback! Please do not hesitate to email us with your questions, comments, or concerns at feedback@youthministry360.com.